

College Students' Self-Disclosure in Writing Assignments: Professional and Ethical Issues

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Abstract

Students are often drawn to psychology courses from a desire for a better understanding of themselves and significant others. Successful psychology instructors are able to apply scientific principles to issues that have an impact on learners' daily lives. As part of upper level courses in family therapy and health psychology, students were given the option of writing a final paper applying course content to their own lives. The majority of students elect this option, resulting in the instructor learning a good deal of personal information about the students. As a clinical psychologist, the instructor is bound by the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles, cautioning against dual relationships, including mandating student self-disclosure and/or providing professional advice or counseling to current students. This article focuses on how to maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries with these writing assignments while encouraging students' psychosocial development.

Keywords

College Student Mental Health; Pedagogical Techniques; Teaching Psychology

Introduction

What is the role of self-disclosure in student writing assignments? Should students be encouraged to reflect upon and describe in writing their personal struggles with psychiatric conditions, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide? Is writing about these experiences a source of healing or harm? Should assignments involving self-disclosure be required?

The author, a clinical psychologist with 25 years of practice experience, has recently given the option of student papers involving self-disclosure in two upper level undergraduate psychology courses. While students have the choice of writing a paper on less personal content, the majority of students select the option involving application of course material to their own

lives. For example, in an upper level undergraduate health psychology course, a majority of students complete a project in which they assess and develop a plan for changing their own health related behaviors. Although students completing this project may address relatively benign issues such as increasing regular exercise, improving sleep habits, or following a more healthy diet, they have also selected alcohol and marijuana abuse, perfectionism, managing depressive symptoms, and changing dysfunctional relationship dynamics. In an upper level family therapy class, students may complete a project describing their own family-of origin. This project stems from the work of Murray Bowen, a well-known family theorist who believed that to be effective, therapists should understand their own family-of -origin [1].. Through constructing a genogram (a schematic family tree) of at least three generations accompanied by a narrative description, students analyze their family history for patterns such as management of emotion, response to death and loss, and mental health issues. Students are not required to present their family and may choose an alternative assignment that does not involve self-disclosure.

Informal feedback from students indicates that they find these personal writing assignments to be valuable and personally meaningful. For example, many students spontaneously report that completing the health paper was one of the few times in their recent lives that they had been able to reflect on their physical health and psychological well-being.

While students report little discomfort with the process, the instructor has struggled with ethical questions raised by these assignments. The choice to include personal self-disclosures as a pedagogical activity has led the instructor to critically reflect upon professional ethical principles—particularly around potential for harm and dual relationships-- and the appropriateness of these

assignments.

Benefits of Reflective Writing

In the past 10 years, there has been considerable research supporting the benefits of writing about life stressors for improved physical as well as psychological health.

Pennebaker's [2] research suggests that disclosing emotionally traumatic memories may benefit both psychological and immunological functioning. Pennebaker's research model involves having participants engaging in regular writing about past trauma and then examining their use of health care over multiple months. In early studies of college students, Pennebaker and colleagues found that there were fewer infirmity visits among students writing about past trauma as compared with those who wrote about a neutral event [2]. Examination of immunological markers has generally supported Pennebaker's view that the psychological and physiological demands associated with long-term inhibition of emotional reactions to stressful life events have detrimental effects.

However, over the course of subsequent research, it became evident that the benefits from writing about trauma are qualified [2]. Interestingly, in the early days of regular writing about emotionally difficult issues, the average participant experienced greater emotional distress than students not engaging in journaling. Fortunately, this was a brief period – usually lasting only 1–2 hours immediately afterward – and on average, only about two days in duration. Additionally, free flowing emotional writing by itself, appears to have somewhat limited therapeutic value. Benefits from journaling only occur when meaning is attributed to emotional experience. This cognitive aspect appears in journal entries later in the course of the exercise with earlier writing being emotionally dominated [2]. In sum, there is a growing body of evidence that reflective writing about significant emotional experience has beneficial effects for college students.

Potential Harm Resulting from Personal Writing

Despite the evidence supporting personally reflective writing assignments, any activity involving intense experiencing and emotional expression has the potential to be psychologically harmful [3]. While personal writing assignments are used in many undergraduate courses and while students may often find these exercises beneficial, the instructor, a clinical psychologist, was hesitant to initiate a personal writing assignment.

Specific reasons for this reluctance include the potential for psychological harm and possible conflicts with the instructor's code of professional ethics.

When taken together, the high prevalence of mental health problems among undergraduates and the impact of these assignments on students who may be psychologically fragile, carry a potential for increasing emotional distress. Additionally, while students are always given less personal alternatives to these writing assignments, concerns about cultural pressures that promote self-disclosure and prevent a truly autonomous choice about sharing personal information, are further areas of concern. Finally, these assignments have a strong potential for creating ethical conflicts when the instructor is placed in the dual role of counselor-clinician and teacher.

There are several reasons why psychology writing assignments, in particular, may lead to ethical dilemmas around student self-disclosure [4]. First, the course content deals with sensitive issues including mental illness, relationships, physical health, and sexuality. Additionally, some students may be drawn to psychology because they have current or previous emotional conflicts that they would like to resolve or better understand. Undergraduate students may have the misperception that all psychology professors are clinicians [4] when in fact, the majority of faculty in an average university psychology department may be comprised of social, development, and general-experimental psychologists with no clinical training. Finally, students may see it as appropriate to disclose this information – particularly if they perceive the faculty member as having clinical training – because they believe that the faculty member will find their personal narrative to be of professional interest.

Mental Health of College Students

Many university teachers are unaware of the high prevalence of psychiatric conditions among college and university students. Approximately 50% of current students have met diagnostic criteria for a psychiatric disorder in the past year. Overall, fewer than 25% of those with a mental disorder had sought treatment for their condition with slightly greater treatment seeking (35%) among those with a mood disorder [5].

Alcohol use disorders were particularly common among college-age populations. Slutske's [6] analysis suggested that compared with non-college attending adults in the same age bracket, college students were somewhat more likely to have alcohol abuse problems. Among college

students, 18% had a significant alcohol problem in the past year (24% of men and 13%). College students, in particular, are less likely to seek treatment for alcohol-related problems compared with non-college attending peers [6].

Faculty assigning exercises involving written disclosures should also be aware that up to 20% of female and 5-7% of male college students have been victims of sexual abuse. While writing assignments involving self-examination can be therapeutic, they can also provoke greater distress among those with pre-existing psychiatric conditions. Given the high prevalence of both psychopathology and emotional trauma among college students, instructors should expect that 25-35% of any class of students will be experiencing current or recent psychological distress.

Do Students Experience a Choice about Self-disclosure?

In its Ethical Principles, the American Psychological Association [8] has expressed concern about faculty requiring student self-disclosure. Students' disclosures, if experienced as coerced, may recapitulate emotional dynamic of prior abuse. . Additionally, if students are processing these issues in emotional depth without cognitive structuring-a key component of productive psychotherapy -the raw emotionality can result in further traumatization.

In the past 20 years, social norms about sharing personal information have changed significantly. The use of social media such as Facebook, have resulted in wide interpersonal networks learning deeply personal content about persons with whom they have never had direct face-to-face contact. Television talk shows as Oprah Winfrey's long running series, present people describing physically and/or sexually abusive parenting, bouts of mental illness, and adultery. These television disclosures are often seen as a sign of the person's courage, part of the process of healing, and provide encouragement to viewers to "tell their story" [8].

This social climate may also place the instructor in the role of therapeutic talk show host [9]. Within this context, students may feel social pressure to disclose personal trauma and may be concerned that they are 'in denial' if they do not share their battles with depression or nightmares of past abuse. Today's college students may also have unconscious or implicit expectations that the professor receiving their disclosures will view them positively for their raw candor [9].

Blurred Boundaries

A key issue surrounding student self-disclosure is the responsibility of the instructor in responding to this information. By learning deeply personal information about a student, the instructor is immediately confronted with ethical dilemmas. Since they often view all psychologists as clinicians, students generally assume that this information will be treated confidentially. Unless the instructor has an established policy regarding privacy, it is often unclear where the boundaries of confidentiality are drawn. In a clinical setting, a patient's disclosure of thoughts of imminent self-harm or potential harm to others is an adequate basis for violating confidentiality to prevent physical injury or death. However, the rules are less clear for student writing and are also vague regarding the seriousness of psychological distress disclosed that should trigger a concretely protective response from an instructor.

Dual Relationships

Even if harm is not a current concern, it would be difficult for educators not to be influenced in assigning grades to students who have disclosed current or emotional distress and/or a history of victimization. For example, will the instructor who knows that a student is currently struggling with mental health issues impose the same standards (e.g., a letter grade off for each day a paper is late) for the student reporting depressive symptoms or traumatic flashbacks as compared with their peers?

This dilemma is an example of one of the reasons that the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles [7] have generated a large body of case discussion and debate concerning dual relationships. The Ethical Principles clearly indicate that psychologists should attempt to avoid these relationships and only enter into them with considerable caution.

Principlism: the Ethics of Student Self-disclosure

Haney [4] uses the framework of principlism to analyze the issue of student self-disclosure in writing. In principlism, choices are examined from how they accord with four values: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice.

Autonomy is predicated upon having adequate information to make an informed decision. With respect to student writing assignments involving self-disclosure, students should be made aware prior to beginning the

assignment of how this content will be handled by the faculty member. For example, disclosures of pronounced suicidal ideation should elicit a faculty response that will keep the student safe. Students should be informed that in certain instances, it may be necessary to violate the student's confidentiality. It has been suggested that faculty describe these issues and their consequences in course syllabi [4] as well as the possibility that an assignment could create emotional distress with a clear statement of alternative activities for meeting course requirements. Another faculty responsibility is of non-maleficence or doing no harm. The instructor has responsibility to balance the potential harm of these assignments with their anticipated educational benefits. Beneficence emphasizes that as an instructor, there is a responsibility to work on the student's behalf and by implication, protect their welfare. Adherence to this guideline would include a position that written self-disclosures will be maintained confidentially. Papers should be returned directly to the student and if that is not possible, the assignment should be destroyed after being graded. Finally, as noted in the discussion of dual relationships, all students, regardless of their psychological status, should be treated equally—another point that can be specified in course syllabi.

Conclusion

Researchers and theorists of emerging adulthood emphasize that higher education should include attention to students' psychosocial development as well as the more traditional emphases on information acquisition and the development of critical thinking skills. Improving students' abilities to reflect on their own relationships, life choices, and values is consistent with this objective. However, faculty needs to be sensitive to the implications of assignments involving student Self-Disclosure and Self-Examination. The high prevalence of psychiatric conditions and trauma histories among university students suggests that there will be occasions when the content of these completed

assignments may require that faculty meet with students individually and in some instances, refer them for appropriate professional help.

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